

July 28, 2020

Rep. Marvin Abney
Chairman, House Committee on Finance
Rhode Island State House
Providence RI 02908

Re: TNC Supports Article 5: Question 2, Beach, Clean Water and Green Bond

Dear Chairman Abney,

Thank you for this committee's and the General Assembly's leadership responding to the needs of Rhode Islanders in this difficult time.

I appreciate this opportunity to share The Nature Conservancy's continued strong support for the proposed Beach, Clean Water and Green Bond, as recently updated by Governor Raimondo. During the pandemic, we have witnessed with greater urgency just how important access to nearby parks, beaches, nature preserves, and open space are to Rhode Islanders' quality of life.

The entire \$69 million package is essential to support a healthy environment, adapt to a changing climate, and enhance recreational opportunities for all Rhode Islanders. Each of the five categories work together to create healthier, more resilient communities and a stronger economy for all Rhode Islanders. Each of the initiatives are essential investments that will be leveraged multiple times over.

Municipal Resilience Program: \$7 million

Over the last year, The Nature Conservancy has partnered with the RI Infrastructure Bank to implement the Municipal Resilience Program (MRP) pilot. The MRP empowers municipalities to identify their specific challenges and opportunities in becoming more resilient to the impacts of climate change. The Infrastructure Bank has been able to offer grants to participating municipalities to help seed their initial implementation projects.

We will complete the initial pilot program in calendar year 2020 with a total of 14 municipalities: Barrington, Bristol, Central Falls, Little Compton, Middletown, Newport, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Providence, South Kingstown, Warren, Warwick, Westerly, and Woonsocket. We have updated the program to provide an entirely on-line experience for the municipalities to ensure program continuity during the pandemic, with surveys, on-line workshops, and virtual toolkits of maps and other resources. The \$7 million allocated in this bond would allow us to expand the program to nearly all of the remaining municipalities over the next several years and develop a pipeline of projects necessary to increase the resiliency of all Rhode Island cities and towns in the face of a rapidly changing climate.

Clean Drinking Water: \$15 million

The Nature Conservancy supports the \$15 million included in this bond to protect drinking water infrastructure across the state – including investments in stormwater

resilience and green stormwater infrastructure. The Nature Conservancy is a partner in the Green Infrastructure Coalition and recognizes the need for investments in nature-based solutions to protect the water sources we rely on for sanitary drinking water.

Natural and Working Lands: \$3 million

Across Rhode Island, our open spaces are under increasing pressure from development. However, forests, farms, and other open space are playing increasingly important roles in the lives of all Rhode Islanders – from ecosystem services, recreational opportunities, growing local foods, employing local residents, and helping us to adapt more effectively to a changing climate.

DEM's *Value of Rhode Island Forests* report outlines the societal and economic value that our forests provide to all Rhode Islanders. These include outdoor recreation contributing \$720 million to the RI economy and the forest and woods products sector sustaining 2500 jobs and generating over \$400 million in gross sales in 2016. Our forests also provide ecosystem benefits that clean our air and water - and will help us better adapt to the growing threat of climate change.

State Beaches, Parks and Campgrounds: \$40 million

Rhode Island's parks and beaches are one of the state's most important features, attracting more than 9 million visitors a year. High quality parks and beaches help to attract visitors and new residents to the state and enjoying parks and beaches has long been an important part of the way of life of all Rhode Islanders. The natural lands that DEM is responsible for are critical to maintaining a sense of place, sufficient wildlife habitat, and other benefits such as storing carbon in a changing world.

The Nature Conservancy supports strong, consistent investment in our state parks and beaches. The \$40 million proposed in this bond represents significant progress toward stewarding these resources.

The Nature Conservancy has seen the positive effects that funding to support natural infrastructure can have across the state. We have been honored to have been a part of projects funded by past bonds to protect our working farms, restore our watersheds, and conserve forest land. There are significant and urgent opportunities to continue this work throughout Rhode Island. We urge the Finance Committee to support this \$69 million bond package and continue your critical leadership in protecting our irreplaceable natural assets which contribute every day to our quality of life and our economic strength.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Sue A. R.', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sue AnderBois
Climate & Energy Program Manager
The Nature Conservancy